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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 136

### Dutch celebrities and Brabantish identities

by

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# Dutch celebrities and Brabantish identities

Aafke Lettinga, Sandra Wagemakers, Jos Swanenberg

## 1. Introduction

This paper departs from the notion of *Brabantishness*, the perception of a collective regional identity in Noord-Brabant, a province in the south of the Netherlands. As a province, Noord-Brabant is geographically determined by administrative borders; inhabitants of this territory are ‘Brabanders’. Brabantish identity as a collective concept however is a much more complex phenomenon. The perception of a regional identity is a subjective social practice. Brabantishness is a sense of belonging to a group in a certain space that is considered different from other groups. The space does not need to be the actual administrative area of the province but may be a much vaguer conception of a geographical entity “where we are from”. Brabantishness is often associated with stereotypical characteristics such as hospitality, sociability, conviviality, compliance, and exuberance, and it is associated with specific cultural and linguistic features (traditions, regional dishes, accent and dialect). The inhabitants of Noord-Brabant are generally known for being ‘gezellig’ (fun, sociable), for speaking with the ‘soft G’<sup>1</sup>, and for having their own festive traditions such as carnival. Despite differences in language use and traditions throughout the province, 51% of Brabanders think ‘a real Brabander’ exists (Leerdam & Van Sloten, 2011).

An important role in Brabantishness can be played by famous people from Brabant, such as athletes, politicians, musicians, and artists. Celebrities who propagate Brabantishness can function as ambassadors for Brabantishness. In times of globalization Brabanders can search for physical expressions of their identity and celebrities can be seen as role models for an imagined community such as the Brabanders. The Brabantish identity is drawn upon typical characteristics that the public may recognize in the image of celebrities. The celebrities, in their turn, can use ways of expressing their anti-majority attitude (anti the cultural dominant West, the “Randstad”, with cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) to support their proximity with their (Brabantish) public. They can function as emblems that stimulate togetherness or bonding. Thus, in search of a common ground, Brabanders may use celebrities from Brabant to consider as ambassadors of ‘their’ Brabantish identity. Celebrities may also use a Brabantish image to create affinity with their audiences. Although Brabantish artists like singers, actors, comedians, or writers outgrow the Brabantish territory when they become famous within the national entertainment world, at the same time these Dutch celebrities may still hold on to their Brabantish roots in their image. Not only do

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<sup>1</sup> The sound of the ‘G’ that is pronounced in the southern part of The Netherlands as opposed to the ‘hard G’ that is used in the language in the other parts of the Netherlands.

they hold on to their roots, they often owe their image as a public person to this Brabantish identity. This image can be based on the way the celebrities use language, the way they embrace Brabantish traditions, or in other ways they behave. Dutch celebrities may deliberately use their Brabantish identity to shape their image as a public person in the entertainment business. Some of them may even use well-known prejudices about Brabant and conform to these ideas. They can also show a more personal Brabantishness represented by their birth village, family stories etc. The way these celebrities are perceived by audiences, on the other hand, is something they cannot control.

This paper analyzes this twofold shaping of the Brabantish image: the image that the celebrity wants to present (the inside perspective, the self-image), and the image that is perceived and constructed by the public (the outside perspective, the image as representation). The public space, in the particular case of this paper the internet and mass media such as television, is the space to analyze these two elements. Social media has an important role in the outside perspective because online audiences can distribute their own impressions about the artist instead of the image artists themselves have created (e.g. on photos on websites or promotion material, in interviews, live on stage etc.). Social media is increasingly a factor in the process of image building. The aim of this paper is to describe how Dutch celebrities from Brabant manifest themselves in public space, how they use their image to maintain proximity with their audiences, how they appeal to a collective regional identity, Brabantishness, and how audiences perceive this. This is procured through four different case studies concerning singer Guus Meeuwis, comedian Theo Maassen, ‘partyrock’ band WC Experience, and comedienne Karin Bruers.

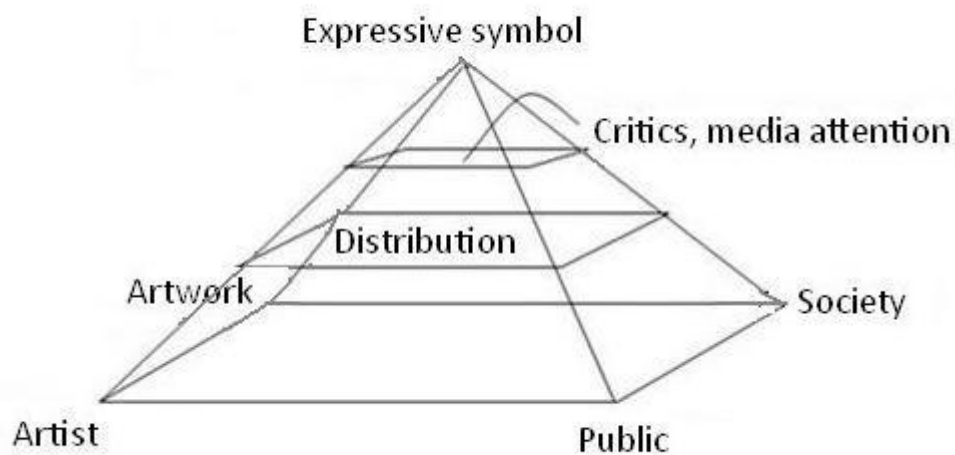
The research questions we address in this paper are: how do Dutch celebrities establish Brabantishness, their regional identity, in their appearance and products? How is Brabantishness of Dutch celebrities perceived and constructed by their audiences? These two questions together can provide an answer to the question: what is the role of celebrities in the construction of Brabantishness?

In section 2 we will describe our theoretical framework, and in section 3 the research method. In section 4 the data are presented through the four different case studies, in section 5 we present the analysis and a synthesis of the results, and in section 6 we will draw conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical Frame

### 2.1 The art world of a celebrity

Every celebrity in the cultural field and entertainment business depends on his or her image as an artist. In this paper we will use a model to describe the various aspects of cultural expressions (the artist, the art work, the public): the *cultural pyramid* (De Lat, 2011), which illustrates the different parties within the work field that can influence the reputation and image of an artist. The cultural pyramid is based on the *cultural diamond*, in which Alexander (adapted from Griswold, 1994: 17, as cited in Alexander, 2003) schematically displays the parties of an *art world* in which an artist operates. An art world is a network of people who are active in the same sorts of cultural activities. The model is designed to analyze the art world of an artist (musician, writer, dancer, or sculptor) as a craftsperson. In this paper we will apply the model of the cultural pyramid to the art world of artists as celebrities, meaning that we will focus on how celebrities are represented and perceived by different parties in the media and entertainment business. All parties within the art world share knowledge of conventions (regarding communication, financing etc.) and produce cultural products together.



**Figure 1: The Cultural Pyramid. Based on *De Culturele Piramide* by De Lat (2011: 19).**

The elements of the cultural pyramid can be applied to the art world of a celebrity in the following way:

The *artist*: In this case, the celebrity. The one that generates the artwork and that carries an image. The person for whom a reputation is formed.

The *artwork*: The cultural product that the artist (co-)creates, for instance his or her singing performances or movies in which an actor plays. Sometimes the celebrity can be the cultural product in itself, without even having certain skills with which they have become famous. In this case the image is even more important than the possible artwork.<sup>2</sup>

The *public*: The celebrity's audiences. Everyone who knows about the celebrity and his or her image. Within this heterogeneous group of the public, we can distinguish a fan base, the experts, and the coincidental public. The coincidental public only knows about the image of the artist, rather than the artwork itself. The fan base usually is more interested in the actual artworks of the artist than in his or her image. In her work *Celebrity Culture*, Ellis Cashmore (2006) distinguishes between different levels of 'fanship': The agnostics; the low worship fans who just watch and read about celebrities; the fans who are keen on the "entertainment-social character"; the fans who manifest "intense-personal feelings" with celebrities; and the extreme worshippers who "over-identify" with celebrities (Cashmore, 2006: 79). Even if we dislike a particular celebrity or celebrity culture in general, we still engage with them as celebrities, but in a different way. According to Cashmore, we are all fans of varying degrees: "Even those who are disenchanted by or even despise celebrity culture's meretricious excess would be hard pressed to avoid watching and listening to celebs." (2006: 79).

The *society*: The "wider norms, values, laws, institutions, and social structures." (Alexander, 2003: 61). These elements of society affect the way artworks in the cultural domain are constructed because they influence the distribution system (production companies), the consumption of the cultural product, and the artist (Alexander, 2003). This is part of the cultural pyramid since celebrities are public persons and may be regarded as role models. Therefore some celebrities perhaps have to consider society's norms and values more than others.

*Critics, media attention*: The way artists or the artwork are received and perceived by experts. The opinions of gatekeepers within the traditional media and the opinions of social media users are essential for establishing the reputation of a celebrity.

The *distribution*: This is the line from the artist and the artwork to the media and public, or – as Becker states – "the distribution of art involves the activities that get art to its public" (Becker as cited in Alexander, 2003: 74). The public has to stay informed about the artist for the celebrity to keep up

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<sup>2</sup> Examples would be Paris Hilton (Wikipedia: "Critics and admirers have said that Hilton is famous for being famous, exemplifying the *celebutante*: a celebrity not through talent or work, but through inherited wealth and lifestyle") and Kim Kardashian (Dutch Wikipedia: "Ze erkent zelf dat ze geen opmerkelijk talent voor zingen of acteren heeft; ze is goed in marketing en zelfpromotie" (she acknowledges she has no remarkable talent for singing or acting; she is good at marketing and self promotion)).

his or her image. An example of these distribution systems are production companies, and other organizations that make sure the artist acquires a 'stage' to distribute their image and cultural products. According to Alexander, the cultural product is a form of communication that needs to be distributed. This can take the form of live performances or different means of distributing the cultural product, such as CD's, websites, or YouTube channels. The '*distribution*' element, together with '*Critics, media attention*' greatly influences the final expressive symbol. The way the cultural product is distributed determines the space between the artist and the public. Distribution of music on a stage may ensure a more direct form of response and interaction than the distribution of music on a CD (De Lat, 2011).

*The expressive symbol:* The overall image of the artist. In this part of the cultural pyramid all elements that influence the image come together.

## **2.2 The role of (social) media**

Building an image asks for an interaction between the public and the artist, with distribution and media as intervening components. The cultural pyramid distinguishes the artwork, the critics/media, and the expressive symbol. Producing an artwork concerns a process of creating, while the element of critics and media attention is more evaluative in nature (De Lat, 2011). In the case of traditional media, the reputation is allocated to the artist; this is a point of view which the artist cannot directly control. This part of the pyramid thus takes place, or used to take place, outside of the creation process. The expressive symbol is subsequently an interaction between what the artist wants to show to audiences, and how the media receives this. Because of the advent of social media however, it has become less complicated for an artist to reach his or her audiences. Hence, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. can significantly influence the image of the artist and the interaction with the public. Social media gives the artist "voice", the opportunity to make oneself heard on one's own terms (cf. Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2011). The artist's posts on Twitter or Facebook therefore can influence the image of a celebrity. This way, the creation process and the image construction (and the involved elements in the cultural pyramid) become more and more intertwined. Social media can also complicate this, because audiences can be very unpredictable.

## **2.3 Identities and imagined communities**

Cultural identity, a collective sense of belonging, togetherness, and bonding, is a social construction which depends on interaction with different social actors. Identity is a dynamic process that is never completed because social actors change. Identity can be differentiated on three levels: *The individual identity*, *the social identity* and *the cultural identity* (Kidd, 2002: 26). The individual identity is a part of the way a person sees him- or herself in perspective to the other, whereas the social identity has to do with "having a collective sense of belonging to a group" (Kidd, 2002: 26). The third level of

cultural identity is a more abstract level in which people feel “a sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic, cultural, or sub cultural group” (Kidd, 2002: 26). The process of identifying at these three levels goes hand in hand with knowing and feeling which group(s) one does not belong to by comparing oneself to ‘the others’. Individuals will search for confirmation when defining their cultural identity. They can use celebrities to help construct their identities by association and self-reflection. Social identities can be produced by a mental reflection that is placed within a ‘symbolic’ or ‘imagined’ community, which means that identities are not based on physical territories but on shared abstract sets of meaning (Kidd, 2002, see also Anderson 2006). These imagined communities are not necessarily formed by people meeting during physical events, but they can appear in interactions on the internet. Social media can strengthen interaction between members of this imagined community, which also potentially strengthens the profiling of the person on an individual level. Social identities, just as they are a process of interaction, are also a place of negotiation. Agreeing or disagreeing with symbolic images, for instance by using online posts, can help people to construct their part in the imagined community.

The need for identifying with an imagined community relates to our wish to belong to a certain physical social (peer)group. According to Hans Mommaas this feeling is, on the one hand, caused by globalization of our direct environment. Globalization refers to a further narrowing of time and space, straight across former national relationships, stimulated by an increasing communicative and physical mobility (Mommaas, 2014). On the other hand, the Postmodernization of our culture also causes a need for a practical and volatile way of identification. In Postmodern society, in which belonging to a group is decreasingly based on religion, heritage, or gender, the range of identifications has become bigger on all three of the identification-levels. According to Warren Kidd “post-modern identities are often described as ‘fragmented’ or ‘fractured’ – meaning that the dominant, absolute and rigid traditional sources of identity have been replaced by new sources.” (2002: 93). Those ‘new sources’ of identity can be used less rigidly, which is why the internet plays a significant role in people’s flexibility to construct their identities or to be part of a community. Crook et al. (1992) suggest that people “refer to the media as providing ‘symbolic communities’ that, if we so desire, we can incorporate into our own sense of self.” (Crook et al., as cited in Kidd, 2002: 93) Obviously the role of media in providing a place for symbolic communities has increased with the emergence of the internet and its new communicative networks.

## **2.4 The Brabantish identity**

We will now focus on a particular case of collective identity: the sense of belonging to Brabant, “Brabantishness”, or “feeling Brabantish”. Driesser (2013) also refers to the postmodern view described in the previous section, regarding the Brabantish identity. He suggests that it is not the question if a regional identity truly exists in a particular region such as Brabant, but rather how it is



shaped and what kind of feeling revolves around this identity. Bijsterveld even went a step further by arguing that Brabant does not have one specific identity, a Brabantish identity does not exist. It is a myth, a construction that borders on self-deception (Bijsterveld, 2009). So being a ‘Brabander’ is not really about meeting certain demands or characteristics. Being Brabantish means taking part in a Brabantish feeling, a collective sense of belonging to a regional group, regardless of the borders of that region. Thus, the community of Brabanders can also be characterized as an imagined community.

An imagined community can prosper with physical symbols that represent this community and that create a collective identity. This can be accomplished in many ways, such as through language choice or role models who can serve as symbols. According to Bijsterveld a regional identity needs pioneers and mediators; a forefront (avant-garde) of public and private parties who generate involvement and solidarity to the imagined community, promoting the collective identity in the process (Bijsterveld, 2009). As imagined communities are abstract, identifying with a group can be embodied by a physical representative. This person serves as a role model for others in the imagined community to reflect on, give opinions about, and compare similarities and differences with. According to Bijsterveld (2009), using regional ambassadors creates a support system and a mobilizing effect. This also applies for the Brabantish feeling; celebrities can be seen as role models and can help create and retain the feeling of Brabantishness.

## **2.5 Dutch celebrities as Brabantish role models**

Being a celebrity is not really about the person itself, but about the way we ‘use’ his or her image and mould it in a suitable way:

You could argue that the most interesting things about celebrity culture are the least important – the celebrities. Less interesting but much more important is *our* preoccupation with famous persons whose lives never intersect with our own and whose fortunes make no material difference to us. (Cashmore, 2006: 1)

One could argue that being a fan of a celebrity (on whichever level) is not about the celebrity, but about being part of a community. That community, in return, is also being valued and reflected on by people who are not included in the community, by the ‘other’. A collective identity is a self-image – as in a self-representation – as well as an image that is received and constructed by others. Regional culture is therefore often based on characteristics defined by outsiders (Leersen, 1996). An identity can be distinguished by the way a person sees him- or herself, which is called a subscribed identity, and in the way others see a person; the ascribed identity (cf. Spotti, 2007). Hence, being a Dutch celebrity as a Brabantish role model does not necessarily mean the celebrity brings him- or herself forward as a spokesperson. That role or identity may be ascribed to him or her by the public.

However, a celebrity can make use of his or her Brabantishness explicitly, intertwining the Brabantish

identity with his or her image as an artist, attempting to create a specific image of themselves in the eyes of the audience. In this way developing an identity or image works in two ways: both ascribed and subscribed identities influence each other. Ascribed and subscribed identities do not only involve the celebrity, but also the public. When the public regards a celebrity as a Brabantish role model, people may indirectly identify with (a certain aspect of) the celebrity or on the contrary dissociate themselves from the celebrity. Thus the collective identity can be a self-image as well as an image that is ascribed to this particular group. Both the internalized image with which inhabitants of a certain region identify and the ascribed image of that region and its citizens influence each other (Bijsterveld, 2009).

## **2.6 Applying the theoretical framework**

Before sketching out the methods of this case study, we will describe briefly how this theoretical framework is applied. The data are studied through a broad search on topics such as the art world of a celebrity, celebrity culture, identity, regional identity, and social media. An overview of the art world of each of the four celebrities is developed based on the research data. In order to identify the different parties that work to co-construct a celebrity, we implement the model of the cultural pyramid. The cultural pyramid is originally introduced to map the world of an artist (a painter, dancer, or musician), but it can also be applied to a celebrity, regardless of his or her cultural product. Celebrities can be viewed as the artist in the cultural pyramid because both the artist and the celebrity depend on their image (the expressive symbol) and on how their image is received. By regarding each section of the cultural pyramid, all the constituent parts in the construction of an artist's image can be determined, highlighted, and researched. In the next section the method will be explained.

### 3. Research method

#### 3.1 Online ethnography and traditional media

Our method consists of the collection and analysis of data from online and traditional media. The aim is to obtain a view on the way Dutch celebrities build their image and how they are received (the expressive symbol of the cultural pyramid), so we want to analyze online self-representation and ascribed identities. However, this phenomenon is contextual (Varis, 2014) and online context cannot be analyzed without taking into account the offline context: “The ‘finished’ communicative products that researchers collect online can [...] be shaped not only by the immediately observable *online* context, but also by the *offline* context in which the digital activity has taken place.” (Varis, 2014: 6).

The online data in this research is therefore viewed in an offline context by assessing videos of the artist’s concerts and theatre shows. As the perspective of this paper is partly based on the celebrity’s public, the most effective way will be to observe comments about celebrities in social media. As such, a more complete overview of the dynamic processes that come with the construction of an image is created. Online ethnography offers opportunities to actually observe the interaction between the image of the celebrities and the fans’ and critics’ response to it (Jewitt, 2009).

Blommaert and Dong (2009) argue that interviews are not necessarily the magic fix if a researcher would like to explain one’s (online) behavior: “[...] people do not have an opinion on or a straightforward explanation for everything (they do), nor is every aspect of our behavior easily verbalized” (Blommaert & Dong 2009). By monitoring the opinions and comments of fans through social media, a significant number of fans (who do not use social media) may be overlooked. Social media data can be ‘skewed’ in the sense that it only includes those fans who use social media (or even more specifically, only those who comment on or otherwise engage with material posted on social media; a lot of people can simply be lurking and watching).

Data on the audience members’ opinion on celebrities were mainly gathered in the second half of 2014. Other parties that influence the construction of the image of a celebrity are the media and critics. The opinions and views from these parties will be analyzed through the more traditional media such as news websites and TV shows. Websites that can be referred to are news and entertainment websites such as *Telegraaf*, *Trouw*, *BN De Stem*, *Brabants Dagblad*, *Omroep Brabant* and *RTL*, and also magazines such as *MEST*, *In Brabant* and *VOX*. Moreover, we have collected articles written about the artists from the major Dutch national newspapers *De Telegraaf*<sup>3</sup>, *De Volkskrant*<sup>4</sup>, *NRC Handelsblad*<sup>5</sup>, *Algemeen Dagblad*<sup>6</sup>, *Trouw*<sup>7</sup>, and the free newspapers *Spits*<sup>8</sup> and *Metro*<sup>9</sup>. For the

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<sup>3</sup> *De Telegraaf* is available from January 2, 1999 through current

<sup>4</sup> *De Volkskrant* is available from January 2, 1995 through current

<sup>5</sup> *NRC Handelsblad* is available from 8 January 1990 through current

articles we have used as a starting date for the data collection the first date on which data has been archived for each news source on the database LexisNexis until the 31 December, 2014. In searching for information specifically about the celebrities studied here, for Guus Meeuwis we used the search term ‘Meeuwis w/10 Guus’ OR ‘Meeuwis w/10 Gustaaf’ (1947 articles), for Theo Maassen ‘Maassen w/10 Theo’ (1690 articles), for Karin Bruers ‘Bruers w/10 Karin’ (37 articles) and for WC Experience “WC Experience” (10 articles). From the articles dealing with Theo Maassen, we have removed 28 articles from *NRC Handelsblad* and 1 article from *De Volkskrant* because they only reported dates and times of performances in specific theatres. Similarly, we have removed 14 *Volkskrant* articles and 13 *NRC Handelsblad* articles from the dataset because they only reported days and times for music performances by Guus Meeuwis. Which (national or regional) media give attention to specific artists and which media do not is also significant, regarding the role they play in the cultural pyramid. Finally, from the celebrity’s perspective the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts are assessed, as well as recordings of live performances through YouTube, but also interviews, album covers, merchandise and the actual cultural product itself, which again results in a combination of online and offline data.

### 3.2 Data analysis

In the significant amount of data that can be found online, the cultural pyramid will help as a guideline throughout the fieldwork to determine useful information. Each element of the cultural pyramid will play a role in the research.

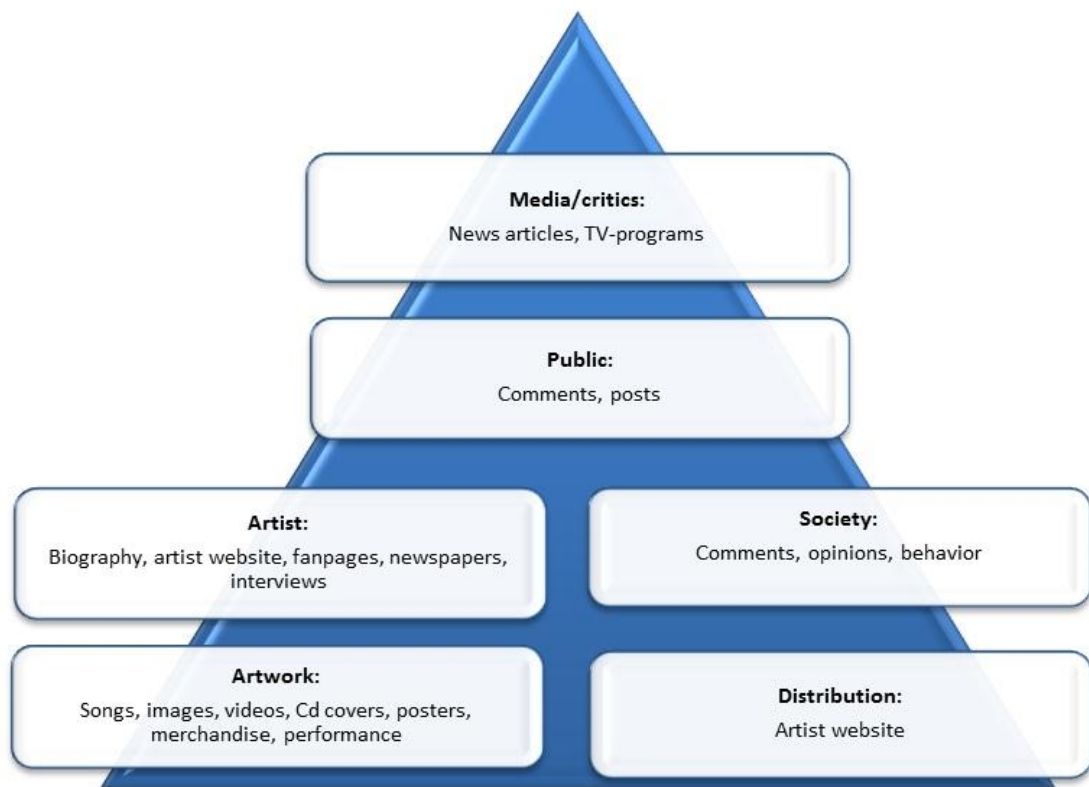
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<sup>6</sup> *Algemeen Dagblad* is available from November 4, 1991 through current

<sup>7</sup> *Trouw* is available from January 2, 1992 through current

<sup>8</sup> *Spits* is available from June 29, 2007 through October 9, 2014

<sup>9</sup> *Metro* is available from July 1, 2007 through current



**Figure 2: Overview of the online ethnographic research components, based on the cultural pyramid (De Lat, 2011: 19).**

The fieldwork starts by looking up information about the particular *artist* and the path that has led to his or her current status and image. This is accomplished by reading artist information in a biography, on fan pages, on social media, and in newspaper articles, but also by watching interviews.

The basis of the further fieldwork will be the cultural product of the particular artist, which can be labeled as the *artwork*. The artwork can be a very versatile element of the pyramid, with the internet sometimes offering an overload of songs, images, or videos. Not only the music or art itself is labeled as the artwork, but also products such as CD-covers, posters, merchandise, performance props, and decoration. These products may seem less important than the primary product, yet they are certainly influential when it comes to the overall image of the artist. Record covers can “convey meaning through all of the semiotic resources of which they are composed: language, typography, images, and layout.” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, as cited in Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2003: 469).

These products together can create a certain theme or message that the artist wants to spread to audiences. The way audiences receive and evaluate the artists and their products can be included in the *public* element of the cultural pyramid. These opinions will be analyzed by searching through

comments and posts on artist- and fan pages on social media. Another part of the cultural pyramid is the *society*, which can be seen as “wider norms, values, laws, institutions, and social structures.” (Alexander, 2003: 61) These values and norms can be viewed as behavior or comments on physical or virtual meetings between the artist and fans or between fans. The values and norms that the artist has, reflect on the behavior of the public, and are context-dependent (exuberant behavior will sooner be regarded as normal during festivities than in a formal interview setting). Therefore, not only comments can be used to analyze values and norms concerning certain imagined communities, but also the behavior of artists and fans during a performance can be of value.

The elements on the second and third level of the cultural pyramid are the *distribution* and the *media/critics*. The distribution of the artist’s product and image are visible for outsiders by analyzing the artist’s website. The media and critics can be analyzed by monitoring articles about the artist in a number of newspapers which vary from local to national and from traditional journalistic newspapers to tabloids. The tone of the articles and certain themes (concerning regional identities) that are part of the artist’s image are reviewed. Also, certain epithets<sup>10</sup> in articles or TV-programs can influence the reader’s/viewer’s opinion about the artists, and they will therefore be analyzed as well. Finally, the datasets collected via LexisNexis on each celebrity were examined for occurrences of several keywords related to Brabant (e.g. the South, the soft G, Tilburg).

### 3.3 Symbols of Brabantishness

All the elements in the cultural pyramid will be searched for symbols that create an imagined community and the relation with feeling Brabantish. This can be monitored by looking for Brabantish figurative symbols (flags, banners), Brabantish language (the soft G, dialect, regional language, slogans), Brabantish names and references (epithets), and other references to Brabantish culture, values, and traditions (sausage rolls, carnival, “gezelligheid”). This can include both century-old traditions and relatively new ‘Brabantish’ traditions.

In the next section we present the data we gathered for four Dutch celebrities with Brabantish identities: Guus Meeuwis, Theo Maassen, WC Experience and Karin Bruers. The selection is somewhat arbitrary, but Meeuwis and Maassen can be said to belong to the group of most famous Dutch celebrities with Brabantish identities, while WC Experience represents a different genre of art, and Karin Bruers might be one of the celebrities most strongly identified with Brabant. Nevertheless, the selection is arbitrary and we are well aware of the fact that these four case studies are just a small operation in an enormous field of Dutch celebrities with regional identities.

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<sup>10</sup> Descriptive terms, accompanying a name and having entered common usage

## 4. Data

### 4.1 Guus Meeuwis: Brabant's pride

#### 4.1.1 From college boy to award-winning artist

Guus Meeuwis has been an established name in the Dutch music industry for almost 20 years. He was born in the Brabantish village of Mariahout and studied Law in Tilburg where he started performing at his and his college friends' favorite local bar (Wikipedia, 'Guus Meeuwis'). In 1994 he and his band won a student song contest. The image of the college boy stuck on him for the first few years of his career. Now he has established a successful stadium concert series called *Groots met een Zachte G* (Great with a soft G). Over a million visitors have attended this event, which makes this one of the largest annual music events of all Dutch solo artists. Being 43 years old, these days Meeuwis has shaken off the college boy image. Meeuwis is an award-winning artist, winning prizes such as the Dutch Edison Award for Best Male Pop Artist. He has even received a royal honor for his contribution to the Dutch pop music and his work for several charity events. While his popularity increases, Meeuwis is also taking his activities as an artist more broadly by appearing in a television game show as a team captain. With these media appearances outside of his music career, he is turning into a well-known TV-personality who is famous throughout a broader public. While many celebrities move to the Randstad area as most cultural activities are taking place there, Meeuwis continues to live in Tilburg.

#### 4.1.2 Ascribed identity by the public and media

A survey from 2011, requested by television network *Omroep Brabant*, shows that a large part of the respondents, especially younger people, considered Guus Meeuwis the best ambassador of Brabant (Van Leerdam & Van Sloten, 2011). Fans leave messages on his Facebook page that show their appreciation for the way Meeuwis presents himself. One person posted a picture of Meeuwis sitting on his knees, serenading a girl in a wheelchair while holding her hand. The caption says "Dear Guus, thank you for the unbelievably great and unforgettable evening". Someone else replies to this post: "This is a great example of what a Brabander should be, Guus Meeuwis, a man with his (golden) heart at the right place!!" (Guus Meeuwis' Facebook page, our translation).

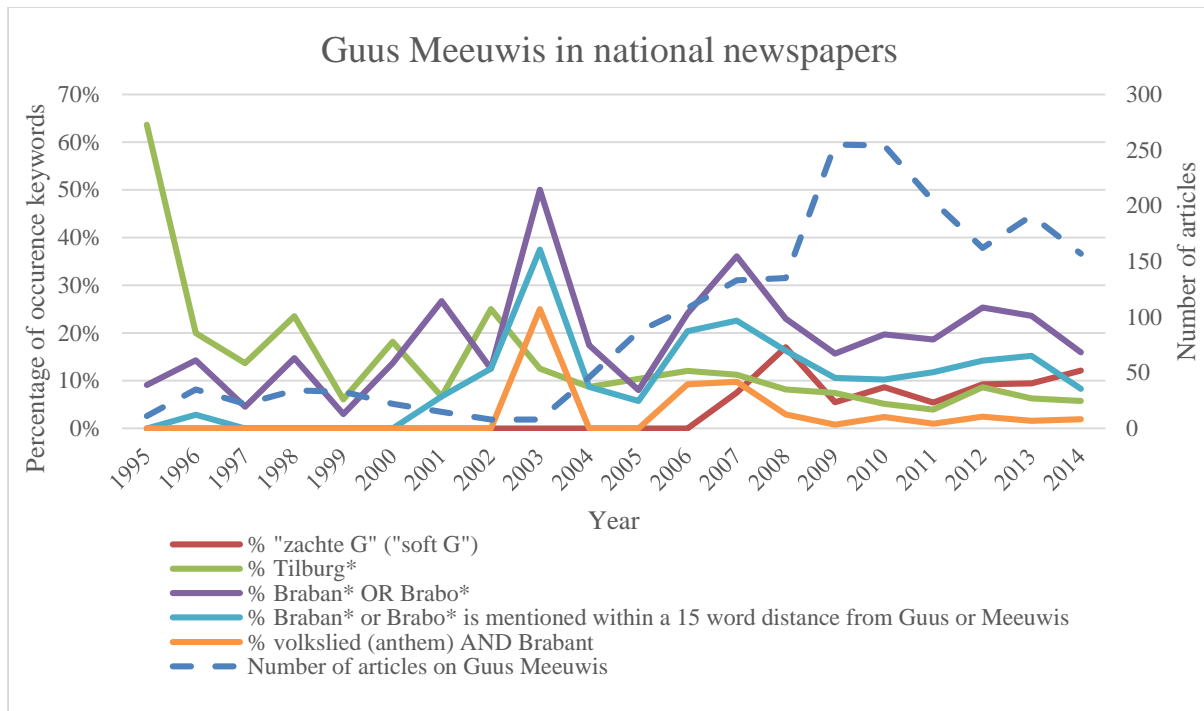
It seems as if the more Guus Meeuwis becomes famous, the more emphasis is placed on his (supposed) modest and friendly characteristics. This idea of a celebrity remaining ordinary and modest may not be specific to Brabantishness, but on a larger scale also to Dutchness (Stengs 2015: 23-24). Remaining ordinary implies authenticity: the celebrity has not changed his behavior so this must be what he really is like.

It seems to be important to Meeuwis that he exudes the image of the guy next door, to gain the empathy of audiences. This gives people the impression that he is still down to earth and friendly, and becoming famous did not make him a spoiled and conceited celebrity. This way fans can recognize themselves in him and measure up to him. His fans reinforce this image by showing their appreciation for Guus' image through comments and messages. In general, the singer is considered a down-to-earth, modest and friendly guy: no extravagant outfits, rarely a media or private scandal, and a reliable and honest impression. According to Van Leerdam & Van Sloten (2011) Brabantish people categorize themselves as friendly and jovial. As such, Brabanders tend to appreciate characterizations such as friendliness and joviality in a celebrity because it contributes to their feeling of being close to a celebrity and togetherness.

While being down to earth and ordinary is associated with Brabant, this can also be regarded as a Dutch virtue. For instance Marco Borsato and André Hazes (from Noord-Holland) are also praised for their 'ordinariness' (Reijnders et al. 2014, Stengs 2015). Like Meeuwis, Borsato is seen as not conceited, but as down-to-earth, and his heart is in the right place. André Hazes' use of his looks that do not confirm to present-day beauty ideals and his 'raw' lifestyle displays the opposite of the glamour of celebrity: as such he may stand out but he is far from conceited and spoiled (Stengs 2015). Chow & De Kloet (2008) illustrate that in the Netherlands, in contrast to the U.S. and Asian countries, being ordinary is a valued characteristic. As such, even celebrities who may be perceived as 'elitist' seem to emphasize their ordinariness (e.g. television-celebrity Linda de Mol). While being ordinary may be a condition of celebrities worldwide (e.g. Turner 2014), this is even further emphasized within Dutch society with its catchphrase 'doe maar normaal dan doe je al gek genoeg' (act normal, that is crazy enough). These Dutch norms are also regarded as Brabantish norms; the normative pressure to act normal and be ordinary may be even stronger on the regional level.

Next, we examine the way Meeuwis is portrayed in the traditional media. The frequency in which the terms 'Guus Meeuwis' and terms associated with Brabant are used in the same article from the years 1995 till 2013 is mapped in Figure 3. This graphic chart shows that the key terms 'Brabant' or 'Brabo' - or variations of words with these terms in it - are the ones most frequently used in relation to Guus Meeuwis. Also the use of the term 'zachte G' started to rise from 2006 because Meeuwis' stadium concerts *Groots met een Zachte G* were launched in this particular year. The overall amount of publicity around Guus Meeuwis increased in 2003 compared to the previous years; 2003 is the year in which Meeuwis' song *Brabant* started becoming popular (Meeuwis & Rozenboom, 2002). Whereas until 2000 Meeuwis' home town Tilburg is more frequently named when referring to Meeuwis, from 2006 onwards Brabant is more often mentioned.





**Figure 3** Graphic chart of the terms that are related to Guus Meeuwis in articles in National newspapers (*NRC Handelsblad, de Volkskrant, Trouw, Algemeen Dagblad, de Telegraaf, Spits, and Metro*)

The media also emphasize Meeuwis' Brabantish image of the 'guy next door'. The connection to Brabant is also used in many different ways. This is clear from the topics that are attached to his name and from the nicknames and epithets that are given to him, such as "the student Brabander (Brabo)", "the singer with the soft G", or "the Tilburgian Singer". But the term most frequently attached to Guus Meeuwis is "the Brabander". Moreover, the media puts Guus Meeuwis on a pedestal by presenting him as the ambassador of Brabant. Examples of epithets that come across in news- and entertainment websites are: "The most popular singer of the South", "The king of Brabant", and "Brabant's pride". This way the media takes his popularity to a different level by announcing him as a Brabantish role model and ambassador.

#### 4.1.3 Topic scales in Meeuwis' lyrics

In our analysis of Meeuwis' artwork, in this case the lyrics, we identified a few reoccurring themes. For this research, we divided the topics into different scales arranged from universal topics to themes with specific references to the Brabantish region or culture.

Scale 1: Universal topics such as love, friendship, sadness, or happiness.

Scale 2: Universal topics in a place-bound context (lyrical or non-lyrical).

Scale 3: Explicitly mentioned topics explicitly related to Brabantish culture and traditions.

While Meeuwis' image may suggest his songs are mainly about Brabantish culture and his Brabantish surroundings, most of his repertoire addresses topics in the first scale of universal topics.

The songs in scale 2 refer to a certain local (Tilburgian or Brabantish) context or cultural custom which makes the songs place-bound. The placement of a song in a context can be articulated by describing everyday experiences. For instance, in his song *Uit en Thuis* (Home and Away) (Meeuwis et al., 2009) he refers to his home being in the South:

*Vanuit het diepe zuiden  
Steeds op weg naar ergens heen  
Om overal te spelen  
Van Maastricht tot Heerenveen*

These lyrics can be translated as follows: 'From the deep South, always going somewhere, to play in every place; from Maastricht to Heerenveen.' Maastricht refers to the capital of Limburg located in the most Southern part of the Netherlands and Heerenveen is a town in Fryslân (Dutch: Friesland) in the north.

In his song *Bij Elkaar* (With Each other) (Meeuwis & Roy, 2007) he implicitly refers to Tilburg, the city he lives in:

*Door de ramen van ons huis  
Zie ik de lichten van het reuzenrad*

This translates as: 'Through the windows of our home, I can see the lights of the Ferris wheel'. This refers to the famous annual Tilburgian fair. The place-bound references can also exude a certain cultural atmosphere. For example, the song '*t Dondert en 't Bliksemt* (could be translated as *There's Thunder and Lightning*) (Meeuwis et al., 2000) refers to beer being thrown around a room ('*It's raining beer*'). This could be interpreted as a song about student-like but also carnivalesque thus Brabantish ritual habits.

Not only does this scale 2 involve the Brabantish theme, but also Dutch aspects of his image. Besides his music career he also appears as a team captain in the TV-show *Ik Hou van Holland* (I love Holland), a quiz which involves questions and assignments based on (traditional) Dutch culture. Even though he does not explicitly express his love for Dutch culture, participating in this TV-show may cause people to connect his image with traditional Dutch culture.

Yet the main reason why Guus is recognized as a Brabantish artist emerges from the songs we have placed in the third category, such as *Drink Schrobbelèr* (*Drink Schrobbelèr*, 2008)<sup>11</sup> and *Brabant*

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<sup>11</sup> An anthem to a Tilburgian drink which refers to Tilburg's history as a place for textile industry. The Schrobbelèr brand sponsored the 2008 edition of 'Groots met een zachte G', see section 4.1.4.

(Meeuwis & Rozenboom, 2002). The song *Brabant* is also referred to as the unofficial Brabantish anthem. The province of Noord-Brabant does not have an official anthem, whereas all other Dutch provinces do. Regional media tried to make this song the official anthem by starting a petition, which was signed by more than 30.000 people, but the authorities did not acknowledge it (Omroep Brabant, June 23, 2011). These two songs can be categorized in scale 3 because they explicitly express his loyalty towards the city Tilburg and Brabantish language and culture. While *Drink Schrobbelèr* is not very well known (outside of Tilburg), *Brabant* is one of Meeuwis' most appreciated songs as indicated by its top 40 placement for the past six years in the *Top 2000*, a popular annual ranking of the most popular songs of all time in the Netherlands.

In short, for the most part Meeuwis' repertoire consists of songs on universal themes, and since the songs are in Dutch, they also appeal to a lot of non-Brabantish Dutch people. While most topics are universal, the connection with Brabant also appears in some songs in explicit or implicit ways, showing loyalty to Brabant in his artwork.

#### 4.1.4 The *Groots met een zachte G* concerts

Once a year Guus Meeuwis performs the most popular songs of his repertoire at the *Groots met een Zachte G* concert series. Most of the stadium concerts are performed in the Brabantish city of Eindhoven, in the stadium of soccer club PSV, but Meeuwis has also performed some of his concerts on the Dutch islands Texel and Curaçao<sup>12</sup>. Though the name creates an association with Brabantish language, the concerts are aimed at a public throughout the Netherlands. During these concerts, a Dutch as well as a Brabantish atmosphere is created through several cultural elements. These symbols can be recognized in the decor on the stage, but also in the props the public brings to the concert such as scarves, banners, and Brabantish flags. During the summers that the Dutch soccer team competes in the European Championship or World Cup, the stadium will turn orange (the color of the Dutch national team) as the matches will be displayed in the stadium before or after Meeuwis' performance. Being a soccer fan himself, Meeuwis is pleased with the fact that this has become a tradition during his shows: "It has become a tradition, which I am very glad to continue to next year. The festivities, the euphoria, and to share this with 35.000 people in one stadium is really fantastic" (Website NL Pop, 2013, December 11). The Meeuwis merchandise sold by his agency also contains a lot of Brabantish, as well as Dutch, symbols and language. Furthermore certain social codes play a role in the concert arena, for example visiting the concert with a group of friends, drinking beer together, singing along with all of the songs, throwing beer, partying, etc. These social codes related to the domain of being a fan, going to concerts with friends, singing along and throwing beer may be almost universal activities, but in the context of Meeuwis' concerts they are appropriated locally as being specifically Brabantish or 'Dutch' codes for behavior.

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<sup>12</sup> This island is located in the Caribbean Sea, and is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Another striking characteristic of these concerts is the peripheral aspect, which is not only a success in Brabant but also in the province of Fryslân (Friesland), where he performs for his Frisian fans. “For three years my fans are coming from the North to Eindhoven for my stadium concerts, this year I will come to them<sup>13</sup>” (Trouw 2008), as Meeuwis states. Frisians find it important to speak their own language<sup>14</sup>, and – like the inhabitants of Brabant - have their own distinctive regional identities. In Friesland the stadium, here of soccer club Heerenveen, is filled with Frisian flags, scarves, etc. The concept of the love and loyalty for the regional identity therefore works for Brabant as well as Friesland, even if the *Groots met een zachte G* concerts at first sight seem explicitly Brabantish because of the name.

#### 4.1.5 Meeuwis in images: album covers and website

Images of Guus Meeuwis on album covers underline his image as the guy next door: Guus with a guitar, Guus on a chair, and most of the covers simply display Guus standing in front of the camera with a plain background. This seems to be about showing the artist in an authentic way and not showing any signs of glitter and glamour.

#### 4.1.6 Society

The image of Meeuwis is not only endorsed by the public and his fan base. His music and his commitment to charity are also officially recognized. He, for instance, has connected his name to a music studio called *Muziekids* in the Elisabeth hospital in Tilburg which creates an image of him as being committed with ill children and the local (healthcare) institutes. Because of these activities besides his musical career, he has been awarded different titles such as the *Knoergoeie Brabander* (Darned Good Brabander), a humorous title which is proclaimed each year by a carnival association to a well-known Brabander who is seen as having made a contribution to regional culture.

The representation of the artwork and the artist is Brabantish to a part of the public. In Brabant, people can be keen to appropriate certain aspects of his behavior as being typically Brabantish, while for people outside Brabant the very same characteristics could be seen as indexing Dutchness. The celebrity Meeuwis is associated with various characteristics such as sociability, hospitality, exuberance, traditions, and a Brabantish accent, but also with ‘ordinary’ behavior (instead of glitter and glamour). These characteristics are aspects of Brabantishness, but some could also be regarded more as typical Dutch.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4324/Nieuws/article/detail/1282463/2008/08/28/Zachte-G-van-Guus-Meeuwis-trekt-naar-Friesland.dhtml>

<sup>14</sup> During the concerts in Friesland, Guus has performed one of his songs translated into Frisian language.

In the next section, we will explore the different aspects of the cultural pyramid for comedian Theo Maassen.

#### **4.2 Theo Maassen: Brabantish rebel**

Theo Maassen, born outside of Brabant but raised in the small Brabantish town of Zijtaart, has been performing as a professional comedian since 1990. In this particular year he won the jury award as well as the public award in a prestigious cabaret festival, making himself noticed across a broad public. After winning these prizes he started working for the Comedytrain<sup>15</sup>. At the moment Maassen still lives in Brabant, in the city of Eindhoven, the city which he regularly refers to in the media.

Maassen's first solo-comedy shows were mainly based on Brabantish characters. His first show *Bepaalde Dingen* (Certain Things) for example, is based on stories about his childhood in Zijtaart, his life in the city of Eindhoven, and the people he came across during these years. Various sketches are in dialect. With this emphasis on the Brabantish culture and language, Maassen (together with his fellow comedian Hans Teeuwen) brought the Brabantish language to a broad (national) public (Bijsterveld, 2009).

As Maassen evolved as an artist, his cabaret shows became more serious and critical towards societal topics. In the meanwhile he has performed in a considerable number of shows as a solo artist. For these shows he was proclaimed 'greatest artist in cabaret of the Netherlands' in 2006 by the Prince Bernhard Foundation for Culture. Even though he has received recognition for his critical notes on society in his shows, Maassen is also known for making harsh jokes during his shows. He does not only portray this critical attitude in his shows; during his spare time he also manages to act rebellious, causing commotion in the media and causing several online riots. By doing so, he has established his image as an artist who does not only make jokes, but wants to be involved with society and wants to participate in public debates, sometimes by investigating – and occasionally crossing – the line of certain norms and values.

Besides his career as a comedian, Theo Maassen is also an actor (comedy as well as drama). He has grown from just being a comedian to being a versatile TV-personality, with the latest addition to his resume hosting the show *24 Hours With...* in which he interviews Dutch celebrities and spends 24 hours with them in a confined room. Behind the scenes Maassen is also active as a script writer and director of documentaries.

##### **4.2.1 Artwork: Brabantish humor with a sharp edge**

The humor Maassen uses to portray himself as a Brabantish rebel is an interesting aspect of his image. The storylines he uses during his shows are connected to the place he originates from. With his jokes

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<sup>15</sup> A Dutch company of stand-up comedians

he seems to have adopted the Brabantish image to rebel against the bigger cities in the west of The Netherlands (“Randstad”). Maassen plays with linguistic features when making jokes, which shows a rebellious attitude towards the people and the culture from the Randstad (Eversteijn, as cited in Bijsterveld, 2009: 108). First, the expressive function of his messages relate to the continuous shifts in language from Brabantish to Dutch. By using Dutch as the main language, Maassen interacts with the Dutch public, but by switching to Brabantish he also uses language to mock people from the Randstad. While switching to the Brabantish language, he makes jokes such as: “The only good thing that comes from Amsterdam is the train to Eindhoven!” (our transl.; *Bepaalde Dingen*, 1994). Another linguistic aspect he uses in his artwork is in the phatic function, which is the way in which someone speaks of social relationships or one’s own identity (Eversteijn, as cited in Bijsterveld, 2009: 108). By switching to the Brabantish language at specific points, it seems as if he makes this joke ‘in character’. The switching from Brabantish to Dutch is the third function; the directive function. Even though the Dutch public can understand the Brabantish language, Maassen still creates a distance by not speaking to them in Dutch all the time (Bijsterveld, 2009). As a result, in his monologues he displays critical and playful language use.

Maassen creates a feeling of proximity to the Brabantish public, not only by using language, but also by self-deprecation. He achieves this by positioning himself as the slightly dumb and naive underdog. For instance, in a sketch for the cabaret festival in which he presents himself as a true *Eindhovenaar*, who is sitting on a beer crate and is unsuccessfully trying to prove to the audience that he is capable of speaking with difficult words (Sketch *Eindhovenaar*, 1994). Self-deprecation is not necessarily a Brabantish aspect of humor, but it is a way in which regional or rural groups use humor to create a feeling of proximity by dissociating from the majority-group. By expressing his critical notes on society in a regional and humoristic way, he creates a stratification in his shows that not only addresses a Brabantish public, but also a broader public.

#### 4.2.2 Society

Over the last several years the elements *society* and *artwork* are becoming more intertwined when it comes to Maassen’s presence in the media. His artwork is increasingly focused on societal topics and he uses his performances in the media to emphasize bold critical messages. Not only during his shows, but also during other activities, he searches for the boundaries of what can be said and what cannot be said. Maassen has become known for several incidents that caused (intentional or unintentional) commotion. He, for example, stole the UEFA cup from the PSV-stadium in Eindhoven, after which he victoriously presented the cup in a live sports broadcast, leaving the TV-host in shock. Also his theatre audience is sometimes the target of his edgy behavior. In one of his shows, for instance, he groped on stage a woman who came late into the room. In May 2008 he also smashed a

12.000 euro camera from a journalist in the audience because she made pictures of him during the show while he thought she did not have permission to do so (Volkskrant, 2 June 2008).

While appearing as a guest in TV-shows, Maassen has no problem of giving his honest and straight opinion on topics unrelated to his career as an entertainer. During one talk show, he said to his fellow guest about her appearance in Playboy magazine that probably only his necrophiliac friend would like her pictures, because the lady (at 60 years of age) was older than the average playmate (*De Wereld Draait Door*, 9 December 2009).

In 2008 he also created a Youtube video titled *Doodsbedreiging* (“Death Threat” 2008 <sup>16</sup>) in which he appears as a rapper, threatening several Dutch celebrities (mainly politicians) with abusing and killing them. He created this video as a reference to the arrest of a few members of a rap group who produced a song with a similar message. By publishing the video, Maassen was trying to make a statement for the freedom of expression, even if the opinions expressed do not suit the general opinion. Maassen also commits himself to other societal topics such as the environment and poverty. For example, together with Hans Teeuwen he went on a boat as an environmental activist to protest against whale hunting, resulting in his arrest. In 2008 he also organized a fundraiser in Eindhoven in which he performed together with other comedians. The profits were donated to a children’s project in Congo.

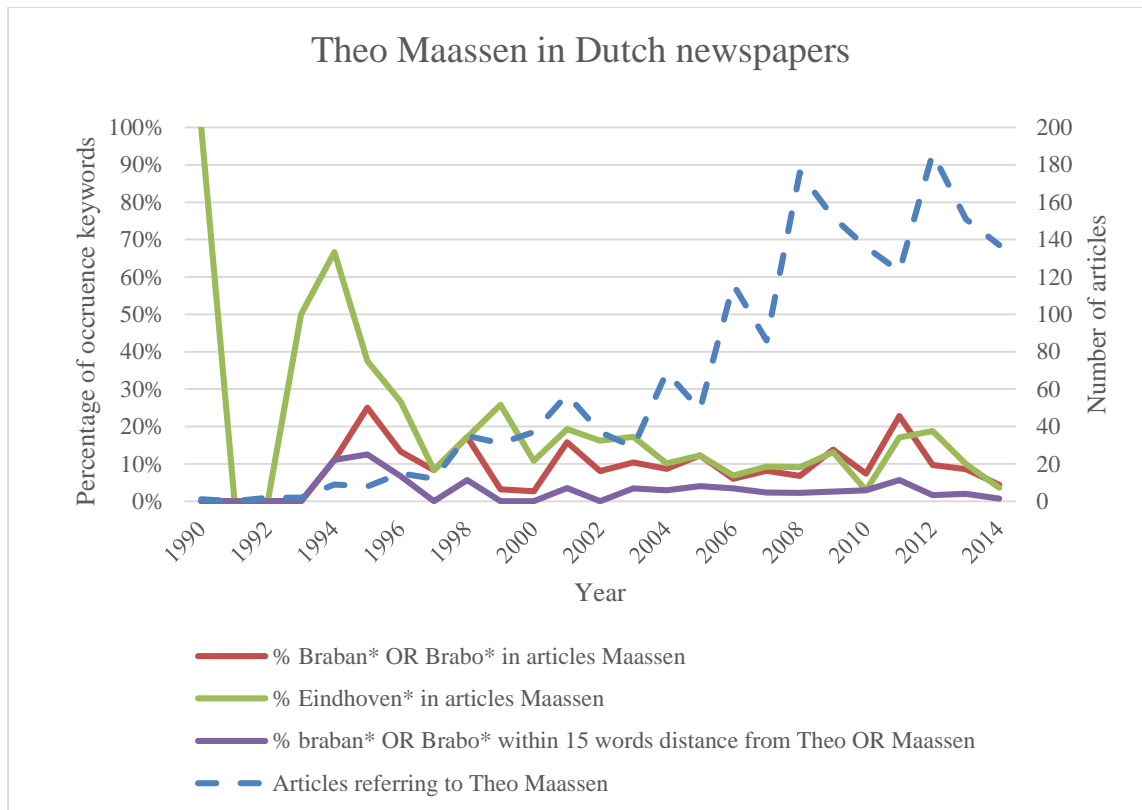
All of this causes the opinions about Maassen and his persona to be very divided. This is noticeable when reading comments that are posted on articles or videos that involve Maassen. These comments are sometimes as extreme as the opinions that he proclaims himself and range from “Theo is the only fun *Brabander* I know” to “Theo is a disgusting person and the people who spend money on him should be getting treatment” (Forum comments Powned <sup>17</sup>). These negative comments are the result of Maassen going against the status quo or standing up for other people’s opinions, and consequently causing commotion.

Examining how the media represents him as a Brabander we can see a difference with Guus Meeuwis. Figure 4 below visualizes Maassen’s presence in national newspapers. In comparison to Guus Meeuwis, national newspapers refer less frequently to Brabant when mentioning Theo Maassen. The peak in 2011 can be explained by Maassen’s occurrence in several movies which are frequently associated with Brabant (because of the setting, the dialect, the topics) including *De Bende van Oss* (2011; “A Gang from Oss”) and *New Kids Turbo* (December 2010). Interestingly enough, newspapers refer to Eindhoven to a similar extent as to Brabant, except for the first few years in which Maassen was still in the process of establishing himself as an artist. Guus Meeuwis is more frequently presented as a Brabander, rather than just a Tilburger, whereas Theo Maassen is presented equally often as Eindhovenaar and Brabander.

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<sup>16</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHExt49rrQ0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHExt49rrQ0)

<sup>17</sup> [www.powned.tv/nieuws/media/2012/02/theo\\_maassen\\_wil\\_geen\\_verkleed.html](http://www.powned.tv/nieuws/media/2012/02/theo_maassen_wil_geen_verkleed.html)



**Figure 4** Graphic chart of the terms that are related to Theo Maassen in articles in National newspapers (*NRC Handelsblad, de Volkskrant, Trouw, Algemeen Dagblad, de Telegraaf, Spits, and Metro*)

#### 4.2.3 Merchandise

The way in which Maassen’s artwork is represented in merchandise, such as t-shirts and DVD covers, suits the manner in which he makes his statements: rough, in strong black-and-white contrast, and minimalistic (‘no-nonsense’). The one cover that stands out from the others is a picture in which he is presented with a tinted skin, an angry expression and a long beard. The covers represents his rebellious and rather critical attitude which seems to be remarkable for a comedian. Moreover, this image contradicts the funny image of a comedian. One t-shirt even has his year of birth and (what seems like) his year of death on it <sup>18</sup>, referring to his theatre show *Tegen Beter Weten In* (“Against better judgment”, 2007) in which he raises the question if people are becoming too scared to express their opinion. So while most of his artwork revolves around humor, the way he is represented in several products suggest his critical messages are more important and his humor has become a medium or channel for distributing these messages.

<sup>18</sup> [www.theomaassen.nl/kopen\\_shirts.php#](http://www.theomaassen.nl/kopen_shirts.php#)



### 4.3 WC Experience: typical periphery

The Brabantish rock band WC Experience is a popular band in a genre amongst the Dutch subculture called *Boerenrock* (Farmers' Rock). Unlike the previously mentioned celebrities, this band is not known broadly amongst the Dutch public, but particularly in subcultures in the Dutch countryside. This is not a surprise, given the language in which WC Experience sings: a Brabantish dialect (more specifically a western-Brabantish dialect). The band exists since 1988, referring to themselves as a *Rock 'n Loll* (Rock and Fun) band. This self-assigned label is based on the way they create their songs; by using American evergreens<sup>19</sup> and turning these into humorous Brabantish rock songs. After years of ongoing success, they also started to write their own songs. In 2009, WC Experience was pronounced the *Best Dialect Pop Band in the Netherlands* on a *Dialectpopfestival*.

#### 4.3.1 *Boerenrock* and the rural idiot image

The phenomenon of the *Boerenrock* band comes from a tradition of farmers' parties in large tents, playing rock music. It comes with a certain lifestyle; most of the public are from rural environments in the Netherlands. This rural element plays a significant role in the cultural product and image of 'Boerenrock' bands such as WC Experience. The *Boerenrock* is a tradition of Dutch rock music sang in regional dialects and featuring the celebration of life in the countryside (Klumpenhower, 2002). This genre was made popular by a band from the rural part of the East (De Achterhoek) of the Netherlands called *Normaal* (Normal) with a song 'Oerend hard' (Very fast) about farmers riding their motorbikes that hit the national music charts in 1977.

One characteristic of *Boerenrock* music is the usage of typical rural instruments. For example, many WC Experience songs feature an accordion. This way the bands connect their music to the countryside. This can also be accomplished by the themes appearing in most *Boerenrock* music. These songs revolve around life in the countryside and critique urban life, particularly in the Randstad. *Boerenrock* therefore seems to be a reaction to a certain perceived threat of urbanism (Klumpenhower, 2002). This reaction is mostly expressed with a rebellious and even idiotic attitude, e.g. enlarging stereotypical features. The "fundamental distinction between the city and the countryside is a distinction between progressive and regressive society, and that the regressive character of rural life is rooted in the domination of labor by nature and agriculture [...]" (Bonner as cited in Klumpenhower, 2002: 142). The attitude of artists in cultural products such as the *Boerenrock* that sometimes can be regarded as rebellious and banal, comes from a need to repeat social patterns of previous rural generations by going against social patterns of the urban life (Klumpenhower, 2002).

#### 4.3.2 Rural and urban life

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<sup>19</sup> Such as Another One Bites the Dust (Queen), We Will Rock You (Queen), and Summer of '69 (Bryan Adams)

The dichotomy between rural and urban life can be noticed in the artists' attitude towards social development. Cultural expressions that are from the rural areas, such as Boerenrock, are sometimes regarded as outdated. Leerssen (1996) used the term *anderstijdig* for this phenomenon, which could be translated as "out of date" or "nostalgic". This term can be understood in two ways: appreciating or denigrating. People from rural areas may approach this as nostalgia, and in an appreciating way; as authentic, valuing traditions, not participating in mass consumption or new technological developments. But other groups can also regard the term as denigrating; out of date, foolish, uncivilized or naïve (Leerssen, 1996: 47). This dichotomy - some Brabanders happily ascribe to the rural image and others don't - does not only apply for Brabant, but for various peripheral areas of the Netherlands. Expressions such as Boerenrock are thus not necessarily part of a regional mainstream culture, but of a certain subculture.

In general the Dutch rural lifestyle can be associated with doing agricultural work, riding motorcycles, going to parties to drink beer, and listening to rock music. WC Experience, for instance, is involved in these kinds of activities by organizing a social cultural event called the Solex-race, in which contestants race a route on a Solex<sup>20</sup> through a village (a route that goes through living rooms, barns, backyards, etc.). This tradition has already existed for years. The band has thus helped create an invented tradition and embraced the lifestyle of their audience and target group. The band also incorporates the rural lifestyle in other ways. Their humoristic lyrics do not only embrace positive elements of the rural lifestyle, but the lyrics also embrace a denigrated vision on their lifestyle, for example by emphasizing uncultivated behavior (Leerssen, 1996: 47). WC Experience regularly points out the dichotomy between the rural and urban regions.

However, WC Experience also contradicts itself in their presentation. Being quite active on social media like Facebook and Twitter, they are using modern ways to present their performances and to keep in touch with their audiences. They hold on to the nostalgic feeling of the rural lifestyle, which at first sight is in contrast to their presentation through social media.

#### 4.3.3 Language and lyrics

Also in their lyrics, WC Experience describes certain everyday situations or recognizable characters that speak to people in the countryside. As such, the band creates familiarity so that the listener can relate the lyrics to his or her own life and experiences (Johansson, 2013: 53). Also the usage of regional dialect creates a proximity with their audiences. The striking part, though, is that this band is also popular in other regions of the country. Their popularity is thus not necessarily caused by the usage of a certain dialect, but by the fact that they sing in a dialect. In the WC Experience songs, the

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<sup>20</sup> A type of motor-assisted bikes which were popular in the Netherlands during the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Brabantish language is combined with Dutch, but also with English and German, including funny mistakes. As such, they make a statement against a certain norm of standard language and they embrace ignorance on a linguistic level. Not singing in standard Dutch and disregarding linguistic rules speaks to their fans. The band members regularly make statements about not singing in Dutch: “We will always keep on singing in dialect, and never give in on Hilversum” (TV Report *25 Years WC Experience*, 2014). Hilversum, in this context, stands for a city in the Randstad from which almost all national media is broadcasted, in Dutch.

This form of rebellion can also be regarded when it comes to the actual content of the lyrics. By denying the original lyrics of global popular rock music and transforming them into banal Brabantish texts, the band also denies a certain standard of music as accepted by a mainstream audience. Their lyrics cover a certain anti-modern and anti-glamorous position. For example, WC Experience entered a carnival song contest by producing an anti-Justin Bieber song, which caused viral commotion with Dutch Justin Bieber fans (Song Justin Bieber, 2014).

#### 4.3.5 Humor is key

Although one may not expect this, every performance is professionally produced. Just by the banal name of WC Experience and the supporting logo (the statue of liberty sitting on a toilet, holding a beer in one hand and a toilet brush in the other<sup>21</sup>), one could tell that the band’s message is meant to be humorous. They wrap their message in a great dose of humor and ridicule. This cannot only be observed in their lyrics, but also during their live performances in which the band members wear crazy outfits (e.g. bathing caps and swimming tops) and use different kinds of ridiculous props (e.g. barbers’ tools to shave people in the audience). This way, they emphasize that they should not be taken seriously. Also the album covers and merchandise reflect the band’s sense of humor. For instance, one t-shirt sold as fan merchandise contains an image of a piece of excrement with a small Brabantish flag stuck in it. On the back the t-shirt says:

*Liever in de stront dan tussen de kak*

The words ‘stront’ and ‘kak’ are both synonyms for ‘turd’. The expressive function of this sentence is however different from the phatic function. The word ‘stront’ refers to the waste of cattle and stands for the rural farmers’ lifestyle. The ‘kak’ in this context stands for a superior or elite group that in Dutch are called ‘kakkers’. Thus, this t-shirt is a symbol of the anti-elite or anti-urban attitude, saying that one would rather be among cow waste than to be found among conceded people.

WC Experience can be regarded as Dutch celebrities in a certain subculture that honors life in the countryside. Their Brabantish identities fit the specific Brabant subculture but also give room for

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<sup>21</sup> In 2014 the band celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and therefore used another logo with the number 25 and a crown, referring to a royal status.

associations to audiences from other peripheral areas in the Netherlands. Next, as our fourth case we will describe the art work of Karin Bruers.

#### **4.4 Karin Bruers: loyal to her social surroundings**

Karin Bruers is a well-known comedienne from the province of Brabant. Her comedy career started in a later stage of her life (in her 40's). Having studied human resources, she travelled abroad for ten years, after which she returned to the Netherlands. She established an entertainment company, which resulted in contact with members of the Comedy Train. She started working as a stand-up comedian for Comedy Train in 1999. In 2008, she started creating her own solo theater shows, including the show *Bruers for President*. She also appeared in and wrote for several national television shows. Moreover, she became famous in Brabant when she appeared on the regional TV channel with the show *Het Bènkse* (Brabantish for The Bench). In this particular show she played an elderly woman who sits on a bench in a street in Tilburg together with two elderly men with whom she discusses her week in a comical manner, speaking in a Brabantish dialect. The public praised her for her diversity as an artist and she consequently won the Ad Vinken prize in 2008. This is a prize which is awarded to people who contribute to cabaret (in Tilburg) and are simultaneously active on other terrains in the cultural sector. She has developed as an entrepreneur who contributes to her social and political surroundings in several ways. She is, for instance, committed to improving the local political environment and she has written a book about growing up as a child in Tilburg.

##### **4.4.1 Inspiration for her artwork**

Bruers has developed as a versatile comedienne and entrepreneur while her Brabantish image is still the common theme throughout her career. In her shows as well as in her book, she uses anecdotes from her past that invoke recognition in the public. Being brought up by a mother of nine children in one of the working-class neighborhoods in Tilburg, she tells about her memories about her youth. Her public, of which the greater part is of the same age as her, can relate to being part of a large Brabantish family as this used to be very common in Brabant.

Bruers creates a feeling of identification during her shows by referring to small pieces of insider knowledge about Tilburg or the working-class neighborhoods in the city. The jokes remain funny for audiences less familiar with Tilburg, but these references create an extra dimension for the public that is familiar with the situations she describes. This proximity also relies on a shared sense of humor, as a specific sense of humor can be linked to people possessing a “shared set of customs and characteristics” (Critchley, 2002: 73).

##### **4.4.2 Societal and political involvement**

Bruers' political and societal involvement is highlighted in her theatre shows, as well as in her other activities. The show *Bruers for President* is a critical view on society in which she stands for objecting to injustice. But Bruers' political involvement is also noticeable outside of the theaters, where she is committed to improving the city's social environment. In 2006 the city council supported one of her successful initiatives: the Social Sofas (or *Bènskes* in Tilburg dialect). These benches are designed by Bruers to increase contact between people and to stimulate social interaction and social cohesion. About 150 Social Sofas were put on the streets of Tilburg and in villages and towns in the region. The success of these social sofas has even transcended the Dutch borders as they can be found in, amongst other places, China, Romania, Spain, and England.

Bruers deploys her fame on her website to contribute to a number of interests in several ways. Apart from information on her theater shows, a part of her website is dedicated to her "Niet Meer Pletten" campaign (no more flattening/crushing)<sup>22</sup>. This campaign is about the torturous way in which mammograms are used to execute breast cancer research. Bruers states about this topic: "On an industrial park in research containers women's breasts get crushed till they have the thickness of an LP-record" (De Leijer, 2014: 21).

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<sup>22</sup> [www.karinbruers.nl/Actie\\_Niet\\_meer\\_pletten/](http://www.karinbruers.nl/Actie_Niet_meer_pletten/)

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Referring to Brabant

So, how do Dutch celebrities establish Brabantishness in their appearance and products, and how is Brabantishness experienced by the public, as it comes to Dutch celebrities? Several ways in which the four particular Dutch celebrities of our case study can be connected to Brabant were identified in this study. Elements of the cultural pyramid such as the artwork show explicit and implicit references to Brabantish identities, but also the distribution system and the media/critics are part of this identity formation. The identification of these artists as Brabantish finds its origins in the way in which they initiated their career and the way they portrayed themselves at that time. Theo Maassen and Karin Bruers started their careers by playing Brabantish characters in TV- or theatre shows. They have since developed as artists, and although the emphasis on Brabantishness is still present in their artwork, their artwork is not necessarily based on Brabant anymore. For Guus Meeuwis it took a few years to lose his student-like image he became famous for. His identification with Brabantishness increased enormously with the unofficial and unintentional anthem *Brabant*. Even if celebrities have moved on from playing the Brabantish characters to developing shows with more societal content, a Brabantish image still sticks to the celebrities because of the identity ascribed to them by the public and the media. This is illustrated by comments on social media and articles about the celebrities. More explicitly, it can be observed in the epithets ascribed to Meeuwis. Many people and media outlets refer to him as an ambassador or role model. Epithets connected to Brabantishness are often linked to his name in articles on websites or newspapers. Being a Brabantish ambassador does not necessarily have to be a choice the celebrity makes him- or herself. The public can also ascribe this role to him or her. But even if this would be the case, the four researched celebrities all (used to) have a certain (explicit or implicit) Brabantish emphasis in their artwork.

### 5.2 Approachability and ordinariness

Feeling proximity towards a celebrity often has to do with the celebrity portraying him- or herself as approachable, and in a way sharing the identity of a community. In the cultural pyramid, this is displayed in the line that connects the artist and the public; the more directly the artist is connected to the public, the more the public will feel included in the celebrity's life. The distance between artist and public can be determined by the distribution system. For instance, artists can be approached directly by the fans through social media. Using regional ambassadors creates a support system for the art work and a mobilizing effect for the audience, which can be even more stimulated by the use of social media. In comments on Guus Meeuwis' Facebook page, the fans explicitly value the friendly attitude Meeuwis exudes. Theo Maassen, on the other hand, portrays himself as a rebellious and outspoken person, which can also be seen in the more diverse comments on his persona: from extremely critical to very appreciative.

The artist's public is also responsible for creating a certain cultural atmosphere around a particular artist. For example, Guus Meeuwis' concerts are either intimate concerts or great festive stadium parties paired with drinking a lot of beer with friends. These latter activities, together with the name (*Groots met een zachte G*), can be linked to the Brabantish *gezelligheid* (cozy and fun). Although this does not need to be connected to Brabantishness (non-Brabantish examples of such stadium parties are those by André Hazes or 'de Toppers', i.e. the singers René Froger, Gerard Joling and Gordon, now replaced by Jeroen van der Boom), symbols such as Brabantish flags and scarves as well as singing the anthem *Brabant* together do point to Brabantishness. The WC Experience concerts also have an atmosphere of sharing a Brabant feeling, singing together, and drinking beer with friends, but here things are wilder: Boerenrock goes together with beer showers and drunkenness. When attending the shows of all four celebrities the public shares Brabantishness with each other and the artist; the art work gives opportunity to sharing Brabantishness. What is striking, though, is that the element of the regional identity does not mean that the public consists solely of Brabantish people. Even though their artwork explicitly refers to Brabant (symbols at Guus' concerts, WC Experience's language), their fan base also include people from other parts of the Netherlands. On the one hand Brabantishness is intertwined with Dutchness but on the other hand Brabantishness is a case of regionalism. Apparently, the regional identity of these artists in general is sometimes more important to the fans than their Brabantish identity in particular. An example of this is the popularity of Guus Meeuwis' concerts in Heerenveen, Fryslân where the Frisian regional identity is quite strongly visible. Regional identity in that case is not exclusively Brabantish identity but rather an 'other' identity than that of the national center (Amsterdam, the "Randstad").

In the case of all the four celebrities, being Brabantish is not only about showing who you are, but also showing who you are not. Being immensely popular on a national level, Guus Meeuwis emphasizes he still is a 'normal' guy with a 'normal' life, not a conceded celebrity. Both Theo Maassen and WC Experience often base their artwork on their resistance towards the Randstad. In their case, being Brabantish also means dismissing the urban lifestyle in the Randstad. In the artworks of both Maassen and WC Experience, dissociation from the urban centre helps to emit a regional identity.

### **5.3 The Others: embracing the nostalgia**

A community can create the feeling of unity by reflecting on the behaviors and values of other groups. An imagined community such as a Brabantish community does not only use role models to identify with, but also other groups with which they can compare themselves. Creating an image goes hand in hand with knowing who you do not belong to: the Others. In the artwork of WC Experience as well as the artwork of Theo Maassen, one will find such references to other groups. In these two cases, the Others are the people in the Randstad. WC Experience refers to the Others as people with an urban

(modern) lifestyle, and refers to the band as being a proud part of the farmers' lifestyle. In the case of both artists, the denigrating part of the rural image also plays a role in their artwork in the form of self-deprecation. For example, WC Experience embraces the 'out-of-date' element in a linguistic way; by using a non-standard form of English mixed with Dutch and Brabantish. In Maassen's case the denigrating aspect is embodied by the naive, dumb, or rude Brabantish characters he plays. Also when he is not in character, he often uses the Brabantish language or accent whenever he makes a rude or edgy comment. By referring to the urban centre the Randstad they imply a reference to Brabant as the country's underdog, and embrace that image using humor (self-mockery).

In her theatre shows, Karin Bruers creates a similar nostalgic feeling of closeness when performing for her audience and speaking about her youth in Brabant. By sharing insider knowledge with the audience, that same feeling of ordinariness is aimed at. An interesting role is played by invented traditions, when the public feels part of an imagined community at a physical event. Some of these traditions are Guus Meeuwis' stadium concerts, especially when the opening act is performed by flag spinning guilds, and the Solex-race co-organized by members of WC Experience. By organizing an annual event that is attached to the artist's image or the associated lifestyle, the artists in a way also create a feeling of nostalgia.

#### **5.4 The use of Brabantish language**

When we analyze the linguistic aspect of the Brabantish identity of the celebrities, the national celebrities Guus Meeuwis and Theo Maassen speak the Dutch language in the majority of media appearances. Whenever there is a humoristic intent (joking about their heritage or their city), they may change their speech towards the Brabantish variety to deliver the message in a humoristic way. Compared with Karin Bruers and WC Experience however, Maassen and Meeuwis speak relatively standard Dutch. This can be explained by their intended public; they both want to engage with a national audience. After all, the more dialect features there are in one's speech, the more it will function as a tool for including and excluding people in audiences. When the celebrities speak in Brabantish dialect, a narrower public will feel close to them. In case of Karin Bruers and WC Experience the use of dialect is meant to give audiences the feeling of belonging to the in-crowd.

#### **5.5 The influence of media and online interaction**

Media significantly influence the way celebrities are associated with Brabantishness. When we analyze the data, it becomes clear that when artists start their career on one path and develop later on in their career in another direction, the image with which they gained fame in a broad public still sticks to them. That way, celebrities like Guus Meeuwis can be presented as 'the king of the south' as if that were a generally accepted idea.



Different sorts of references to the four celebrities' Brabantish heritage and culture are available on the internet and in the media. In the construction of the Brabantish image social media use and the public also plays a role. The general tendency seems to be that the more the celebrity is explicit on social or political topics, the more outspoken reactions and comments about this celebrity turn out to be. Artists such as Guus Meeuwis and Karin Bruers do not express a strong negative opinions, which results in mild comments on their persona. WC Experience and Theo Maassen, on the other hand, receive more diverse comments on their attitudes towards urban life, modern phenomena, and the Randstad.

The Brabantish aspect is not only reflected in the content of the comments and messages, but also in the form of the comments made by audiences. People's messages on the pages of all four celebrities varied from grammatically correct Dutch language to the use of (correct and incorrect) Brabantish dialect. The incorrect use of dialect can also be called 'hyper dialect'; it is a statement in (written) language which is made specifically for the form, not necessarily for the content of the message (cf. Visser, Nortier & Swanenberg 2015). This way, the writer of the message can make clear that he or she wants to be associated with a certain regional identity (and the celebrity in question) (Van der Borgt, 1996: 11).

## 6. Conclusion

The expression of a Brabantish image, implicit or explicit, can be regarded as an exchange between the different elements, online and offline, of the artist's art world presented above in the cultural pyramid: between the artist, the artwork, the public, and society. A certain image can also be boosted by the media and by the distribution of the artwork on a higher level in the pyramid. Certain elements of the cultural pyramid cannot be overlooked when it comes to influencing the image (the expressive symbol). The societal element plays a significant part in the construction of the celebrity's image. When a celebrity is born and/or raised in Brabant, remains connected to his or her heritage by sponsoring or helping regional institutions or charity, and continues to live in Brabant – while the artist may have become famous on national level – this is appreciated by fans from Brabant. Fans often express their appreciation through social media, which is a way of feeling proximity between the artist and the public.

The four celebrities examined here vary in fame; ranging from national to regional, from having a broad public to fame within a specific subculture. The art work of the four celebrities show a broad spectrum in which a Brabantish image may come forward. While some celebrities are appreciated for their personality or involvement (Meeuwis and Bruers), others are more Brabantish in their dissociating attitude towards the urban Randstad lifestyle (Maassen and WC Experience). Certain epithets and stereotypes in the image of the celebrity are abundantly brought forward by the media. What determines or influences a Brabantish image is very diverse and dynamic. While one celebrity has the image of a Brabander because the cultural artifact he or she produces, another celebrity may not be purposely presenting him- or herself as such, but is still known as a Brabantish ambassador or role model. This way, the image may be more valuable than the actual artwork of the artist, when the public tries to create a sense of belonging, proximity, togetherness, and bonding.

In general, the celebrities refer to Brabantishness in their artwork as well as in the media (subscribed identity). Although Brabantishness is a manifestation of an imagined community, based on associations and stereotypes, the sense of belonging is important for the public and for the artist. In their artwork, their heritage can be referred to in an appreciating or in a denigrating (self-deprecatory) way, but not seldom in an anti-Randstad context. A Brabantish identity can thus also be the result of an antagonistic attitude towards the majority group. In any case, Brabantishness functions as a means of including and excluding. Hence, by using aspects of the cultural pyramid to broadcast associations, celebrities create a proximity that is searched for by their audiences: a shared Brabantishness.

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